

1 Refereeing the Tackle

Here is a perspective on Refereeing the Tackle, originating from Kevin Baskin, and developed through discussion with the USARRA Developmental Referee Program, especially Paul Bretz, Bruce Carter and Peter Watson.

Slowing the Game for the Referee Creating a faster Game for the Player

As the Game of Rugby gains in pace and intensity we must keep foremost in our mind as referees what our ultimate objectives are in every phase. The Charter on the Game describes Rugby in the broadest terms:

It is the aim of the team in possession to maintain continuity by denying the opposition the ball and, by skilful means, to advance and score points. Failure to do this will mean the surrendering of possession to the opposition either as a result of shortcomings on the part of the team in possession or because of the quality of the opposition defense. Contest and continuity, profit and loss.

As one team attempts to maintain continuity of possession, the opposing team strives to contest for possession. This provides the essential balance between continuity of play and continuity of possession. This balance of contestability and continuity applies to both set piece and general play.

What does our Game look like today?

- Ball in play time is increasing to nearly 50% in international play
- There are approximately 4 ruck/mauls per minute of possession
- There are now nearly 300 passes per match, and 150 ruck/maul phases
- (compared to 36 lineouts, 21 scrums)
- 80% of passing movements contain 2 passes or less

- Penalties for ground offenses at ruck and tackle account for 47% of all penalties

What do we do to hinder our performance at the tackle?

- Arrive late
- Penalize the 2nd or 3rd offense
- Allow ball-slowing
- Referee pile-ups until foul play occurs

How can we improve our performance at the tackle?

- Arrive early (ideally, third man in)
- Recognize the "context" of the tackle (see **Understanding the Tackle**)
- Have a clear mental image of what is expected (see **Tackle Checklist**)
- Referee only what you need to, then move on
- Be consistent and fair – continually analyze your performance
- Communicate effectively – obtain an effective response

Understanding the Tackle

In many phases of the Game, the Referee can improve performance simply by decreasing the amount of background "noise" and increasing attention to critical elements.

The greatest source of noise for most of us is uncertainty – where is the ball, who carried it into the tackle, is the tackler making an effort to release the tackled player but trapped by other participants in the tackle or trying to slow the ball until his mates can organize their defense?

What can increase our uncertainty?

- Unclear knowledge of the Law – "Is that legal or not?"
- Lack of clear mental image of expected behaviors
- Inability to see the ball or the ball carrier – poor position or too far away

- Confusion about where poor player skills leaves off and an intent to do mischief begins
- Misunderstanding the motives of players involved in the tackle
- Distractions from arriving players and players not involved in the tackle
- Challenges to our competence – complaints from players, coaches, others
- Rising tempers due to intensity of match or perception of unfair competition
- Anoxia – lack of fitness doesn't allow enough oxygen for optimal processing
- Lack of match fitness – unfamiliarity with level of pace and intensity

There is no substitute for being present at the tackle. This means adequate fitness, anticipation, understanding the flow of the match, getting away from the last piece or phase early, good running lines, allowing yourself adequate pace and space.

As you arrive at the tackle, you must recognize its "context". There are basically four kinds of tackle:

- The **strong tackle** – ball carrier advancing through the tackle with close support
- The **weak tackle** – ball carrier being driven back by defenders with close support
- The **isolated tackle** – ball carrier brought to ground without support
- The **pile-up** or **static tackle** – ball carrier mass-tackled without movement

Each type of tackle can be refereed in context if it is recognized, understanding the motives of participants in each case, and greatly reducing the amount of noise for the ref.

At a **strong tackle**, the ball should be quickly available to the side in possession. Don't find the ball, find the tackler. He/she is the one motivated to slow ball production until his side can regroup in defense. If the ball isn't immediately available, penalize for failure to release the tackled player. If the ball comes out the "wrong" way, penalize for playing the ball off the ground. The result of a strong tackle should favor the side in possession, since they had the skill to take a tackle under control. If the ball is immediately available, get space and start early for where the ball will go next. Allow time for the ball to be played. Watch for arriving defenders to leave their feet to seal the ball or come in from the side to slow the ball. Protect space.

At a **weak tackle**, find the ball carrier. The ball carrier must make the ball available immediately, releasing it to players on their feet, getting it away from their body and getting up or rolling away. If the ball is not immediately available, penalize the tackled player for failing to play the ball. The result of a weak tackle may favor the tackler's side, since they had the skill to drive the ball carrier back with support, unless the tackled player is skilful enough to legally make the ball available for quick recycling. Do not allow the tackled player to roll over the ball, or to lie on or over the ball so as to obstruct arriving players from playing the ball. If the ball is legitimately buried, whistle quickly rather than attempt to referee a pile up. However, if the ball is on the defender's side find the ball quickly and move to a position where you can referee the change in possession. In this case allow time for the ball to be played. Protect players on the ground. Watch for arriving players from the tackled player's side to leave their feet to seal the ball or come in from the side to slow the ball. Protect space.

At an **isolated tackle**, find the ball. The ball carrier must make it available immediately! He/she wants to hold the ball in close to his body to make poaching difficult until his support arrives. If a defender on his feet tries to play the ball but is not able, penalize the tackled player for failure to release. The result of an isolated tackle surely favors the tackler's side, who were skilful enough to bring him down alone, without support. (Don't mistake a player going to

ground to gather the ball for an isolated tackle. This comes under Law 14. Defenders in this case are not tacklers. They cannot fall on or over the player on the ground, and must allow him to play the ball immediately or to get up.) Make sure arriving players respect the tackle zone (come through the gate). Communicate clearly when a ruck has formed and require anyone not in clear possession of the ball to let go and ruck it out. Don't set artificial offside lines if no ruck forms.

At a **static tackle**, find the ball. If it is not immediately available whistle it up. By definition, at this sort of tackle many players have left their feet. Only bad things can happen if play is allowed to continue indefinitely hoping the ball will emerge. There is no "skilful" play to reward here. There is no Rugby. This is a Game for players on their feet. A scrum is a fine way to restart play when it has stopped. Penalties following a static tackle are most often the fault of the referee!

The referee must reflect periodically through the match, asking himself whether the ball is being recycled "quickly enough", and whether "too many" pile-ups are resulting in stoppages. If the ball is getting slowed or stopped too often the referee must solve the problem of "why?" Persistent ball-slowng infringements must be dealt with severely.

By understanding the "context" of each tackle, and knowing what expected outcomes and player motivations are likely at each type of tackle, the amount of information that must be processed by the referee to achieve a correct decision are greatly reduced. This allows the referee to confidently focus on a relatively few data points, and to rapidly make a sensible decision that rewards positive, skilful play, prevents or penalizes negative play, and encourages both fair contest and flowing continuity.

Tackle Checklist. (Order of priority)

- Tackler
- Tackled player

- Arriving players

Tackler

- Tackler can fall where he/she likes but must roll away immediately
- Ball must be available immediately regardless of body position of the tackler
- Be vigilant on tacklers preventing ball being played
- Unplayables have a place but can't be a cop out for not refereeing the tackle
- Unplayables should be blown quickly
- A number of unplayables may indicate a problem
- Tackler must release the tackled player and get to their feet before they play the ball
- Tacklers getting to their feet can't support themselves on the tackled player and in the process stop the tackled player from releasing the ball. Contact is OK if player is on his feet
- Tackler is defined as a player who goes to ground and is the only player who can come from "the wrong side".

Tackled player

- Must play the ball immediately
- Must release ball to player on his feet
- Squeeze ball is acceptable provided the tackled player makes the ball available immediately

Arriving players

- Be aware of players on their feet pulling the ball back into the tackled player and looking for a penalty (for the tackler not releasing)
- Players who go voluntarily to ground should be penalized. Attacking sides to be dealt with the same as the defending team

- Referees are encouraged to use the words " players voluntarily going off their feet" rather than say, "there are too many bodies on the ground"
- Players positively clearing out a player in the act of making a new tackle and/ or forming a Ruck is acceptable if arms and hands are used and not a shoulder only
- Arms must be used in the cleaning out motion.

The following analogies apply to arriving players

- Plane taking off is acceptable
- Plane landing is not acceptable
- Fork Lift truck when moving players is acceptable
- If not using fork lift technique, players are planes landing and this is not acceptable

Cleanout at the Tackle

- Must be near the ball, referees should watch for the wide hits and shoulder charges. Coffee table approach should be applied, i.e. 1 metre width either side of the ball.

Angle of approach to the tackle

- Players can only approach from the "wrong side" of the tackle if they meet the definition of a tackler. (NOTE: Tacklers are defined as "opponents of the tackler (involved in the tackle) who go to ground")
- Players who play the ball after a tackle must do so from the direction of their own goal line and directly behind the tackled player or tackler nearest to their goal line. The heading should read Law 15 7 (c)
- The intention of the Law is that players at the tackle who play the ball must do so from directly behind the ball and from directly behind the tackled player. i.e. this applies particularly to players who do not go to ground when the tackle is made (often they are "assisting tacklers").

Dangerous Tackles

- High - No Arms – Spear - Tackle on the collar

Tackles could be

- “Late” - “Early” – “Late and Dangerous” - “Early and Dangerous”

From Australian Rugby "Game Management Guidelines 2004"